

CAL FIRE leads nation in fire preventable construction

New building codes make structures safer before the fire ignites

By Ernylee Chamlee, staff chief, Wildland Fire Prevention Engineering, Sacramento Headquarters

Year after year, Californians have watched raging wildfires threaten and destroy communities. The history of these fires dates back to the early 1900s when people began to settle in the areas of California where wildfires have always been a way of nature. Homes have burned, lives were lost, businesses were ruined, communities became devastated and millions of dollars were spent on trying to suppress these fires. CAL FIRE said, ***“There must be a better way!”***

CAL FIRE has successfully taken a historical step forward in the prevention of property damage due to fires in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Under the leadership of our State Fire Marshal personnel, the State of California initiated special California Building Standards for all new construction in the WUI. These requirements will protect structures from ignitability caused by flying embers entering the structure through roof openings, windows or being lodged in other flammable surfaces. These building standards, found in Chapter 7A of the California Building Code, go into effect January 2008.

Research in the Wildland-

Urban Interface (WUI) home losses provided new information on why homes burn and how we can best protect them BEFORE the fires occur. We know that defensible space (which keeps the direct flames and heat away from

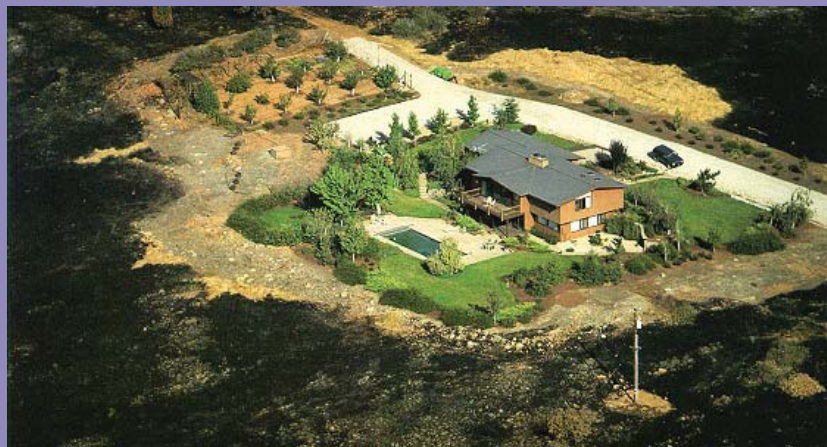
caused by flying embers entering the structure through roof openings, windows or being lodged in other flammable surfaces such as deck and roof framing. These building standards, found in Chapter 7A of the California

Building Code, go into effect January 2008. California will be the first state in the nation to require ignition resistive construction of all new structures built in the WUI areas designated as “Very High Fire Severity Zones.”

The Fire and Resource

Assessment Program (FRAP), under the direction of Staff Chief Wayne Mitchell, is updating the new Statewide Fire Hazard Zone Maps. The maps are being sent to each CAL FIRE Unit for review and acceptance of the zone designations. Once approved by the CAL FIRE Units, the maps will be shared with all local jurisdictions that have areas labeled “Very High.” The local government can vote to accept or reject the designation for the area(s).

Until recently, little, if any, comprehensive guidance as to how to best construct homes and projects in WUI areas existed. The new Chapter 7A of the California Building Code is the



the sides of the building by eliminating flammable vegetation in the home ignition zone) helps protect homes during wildfires. Senate Bill 1369 increased the minimum clearance (defensible space) requirements for all buildings in the State Responsibility Areas (SRA) from 30 feet to 100 feet.

In addition to the implementation of the new 100 foot requirement, the State Fire Marshal personnel have successfully initiated special California Building Standards for all new building construction in all “Very High Fire Severity Zones” in the State. These requirements will protect structures from ignitability

first to address any fire-related construction requirements. They go into effect January 2008 and include: ignition resistive siding and decking, double-paned windows, eaves and wall vents that reduce ember penetration, and enclosed overhanging decks.

CAL FIRE, under the direction of Steven Quarles (a CAL FIRE contract employee from California University of Berkeley) is prepar-

ing training curriculum for all state building officials, industry personnel and community development staff. The training will be available for CAL FIRE personnel also.

Many changes have taken place in the staff organization of Fire Prevention. Dave Hillman is now Chief of Fire Prevention and Law Enforcement and reports to the State Fire Marshal under the new

reorganization. Tom Hoffman, Chief of Law Enforcement along with his staff, Ernylee Chamlee, Chief of Wildland Fire Prevention Engineering, Chief Vickie Sakamoto and her SFM Fire Engineering Staff all work under the direction of Chief Hillman. You will be seeing much more fire prevention information in the coming months.

CAL FIRE / Butte County Fire celebrates its 75th anniversary



Above, equipment from throughout the years was on display at the event.

Right, Unit Chief Henri Brachais displays an Assembly Resolution commemorating CAL FIRE / Butte County.



On November 9, 2006 CAL FIRE / Butte County Fire celebrated its 75th anniversary with a large luncheon filled with history, stories of the past, and visions for the future. More than 300 people attended the event in Oroville. The inside of the community center had tables filled with firefighting tools from throughout the years. Outside, visitors were welcomed with a look at fire equipment from a historic Model A to a brand new engine.

Photos by Wes Schultz.



Above, firefighting tools were displayed by decade allowing visitors to see the advancements in technology.

Left, Deputy Chief George Morris emceed the event.

